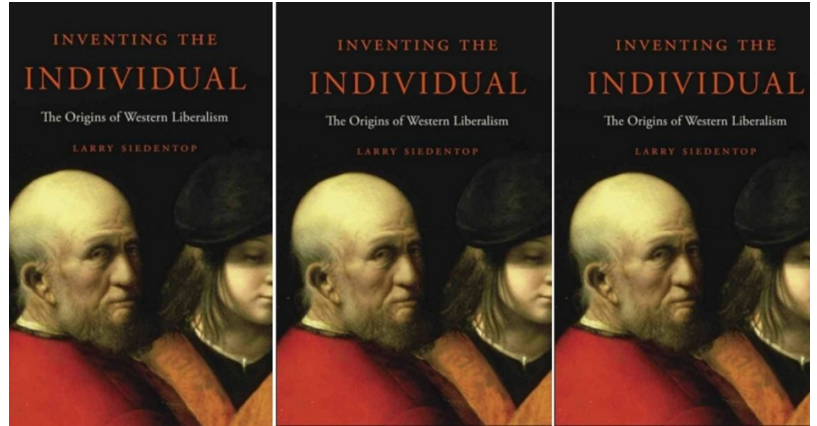




Written by [James Heiser](#) on January 23, 2016

## A Review of “Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism”

In an age in which “cultural relativism” seems an unchallenged standard in academia, Larry Siedentop’s [Inventing the Individual — The Origins of Western Liberalism](#) is a pleasant deviation from that norm. A political philosopher who served as a Fellow of Keble College, Oxford, Siedentop wrote *Inventing the Individual* as an apology for the West as a civilization which is caught up in a “competition of beliefs, whether we like it or not.” Siedentop identifies “Islamic fundamentalism” as a primary competitor for Western civilization, but it is impossible to avoid the obvious point that the most vigorous opponents of his central thesis — the inseparability of modern Western liberalism from its Christian origins — would come from the ranks of his fellow intellectuals. Still, Siedentop observes in his Prologue:



Today many people in the West describe themselves as Christians, without regularly going to church or having even a rudimentary knowledge of Christian doctrine. Is this just hypocrisy or ignorance? Perhaps not. It may suggest that people have a sense that the liberal secular world they live in — and for the most part endorse — is a world shaped by Christian beliefs. If so, by describing themselves in that way, they are paying tribute to the origins of their moral intuitions.

*Inventing the Individual* is an insightful recounting of the intellectual history of the West from its origins in Greek and Roman antiquity through the early influences of Christianity in the pagan world through the so-called Dark and Middle Ages to give birth to the Modern Age. Siedentop thus traces from its biblical basis in the first century the advent and development of the concept of the individual —that is, the individual as a discrete entity, created by God, and endowed with liberty by his Creator. Thus, for Siedentop, the Apostle Paul is an architect of the entire Western notion of equality under law: “In Paul’s writings we see the emergence of a new sense of justice, founded on the assumption of moral equality rather than on natural inequality. Justice now speaks to an upright will, rather than describing a situation where everything is in its “proper” or fated place. Paul’s conception of the Christ exalts the freedom and power of human agency, when rightly directed. In his vision of Jesus, Paul discovered a moral reality which enabled him to lay the foundation for a new, universal social role.”

Siedentop understands that his thesis is anathema to many within the ranks of liberal academia:

The suggestion that belief in “equal liberty” appeared in early Christian apologetics will surprise many and irritate some. For the anti-clericalism which has been an integral part of liberal



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historiography does not lend itself to such a conclusion. Besides, the distrust of anything like teleological explanations in history — or what is often called the Whig interpretation of history — reinforces such scepticism. But texts are facts. And the facts remain. In the mid-second century Irenaeus of Lyon asked, “What new thing did the Word bring by coming down to earth?” For Tertullian, writing only a few decades later, the answer was clear. “One mighty deed alone was sufficient for our God — to bring freedom to the human person.”

Siedentop painstakingly recounts the various twists and turns in the development of the theology of the early and medieval Church in such a way as to render it comprehensible to a modern reader who may not be particularly well-versed in the history of Christian theology. Although a reader who is familiar with the details of this history may find occasions in which he would disagree with aspects of Siedentop’s analysis, such disagreements do not fundamentally undermine the value of *Inventing the Individual*. Thus, for example, one may certainly disagree with Siedentop’s seemingly-glowing evaluation of William of Occam’s *Nominalism* as “the ultimate stage of a war which from its outset the Christian church had waged against polytheism”; Richard Weaver’s magnum opus, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), is a vigorous defense of Realism against Nominalism as a bulwark of Christian thought. Nevertheless, Siedentop demonstrates that regardless of whether or not particular developments in Christian thought were the best expression of biblical teaching, they are the source of Western thought concerning the nature of the individual.

One implication of Siedentop’s line of thought is that the elitism which was common in Renaissance thought (that is, the notion that the medieval Church had sorely neglected the treasures contained in ancient pagan philosophy) is revealed to be fundamentally misguided:

The view that the Renaissance and its aftermath marked the advent of the modern world — the end of the “middle ages” — is mistaken. By the fifteenth century canon lawyers and philosophers had already asserted that “experience” is essentially the experience of individuals, that a range of fundamental rights ought to protect individual agency, that the final authority of any association is to be found in its members, and that the use of reason when understanding processes in the physical world differs radically from normative or *a priori* reasoning. These are the stuff of modernity.

Siedentop is concerned for the defense of the West against those who attack it, both from within and without. The West depends on the continuation of a shared body of beliefs, and those shared beliefs are rooted in the Christian verity:

Like other cultures, Western culture is founded on shared beliefs. But, in contrast to most others, Western beliefs privilege the idea of equality. And it is the privileging of equality — of a premise that excludes permanent inequalities of status and ascriptions of authoritative opinion to any person or group — which underpins the secular state and the idea of fundamental or “natural” rights. Thus, the only birthright recognized by the liberal tradition is individual freedom.

Christianity played a decisive part in this.

Therefore, inculcating an ambivalence to the importation of adherents of Islam places the West in danger by arrogantly assuming that the implications of a fundamentally different worldview will be ignored by the adherents of a religion that is markedly different from the faith that shaped the modern West:

In Europe, massive immigration and the growth of large Muslim minorities have widened the range



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of non-Christian beliefs dramatically. And such beliefs have consequences. Quite apart from the acts of terrorism which invoke — more or less dubiously — the name of Islam, Muslims are frequently encouraged to look forward to replacing the laws of the nation-state with shariah “law”. Islam seems to sit uneasily with secularism.

Siedentrop’s *Inventing the Individual* is worthy of careful study by those who believe the West’s heritage of liberty and equality under law should be defended and maintained. The author of this important work is obviously aware of what is at stake if political correctness is allowed to push aside efforts to preserve a legal and theological heritage shaped over the course of 20 centuries.

Larry Siedentrop, [\*Inventing the Individual — The Origins of Western Liberalism\*](#) (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014). Hardcover. 434 pages.



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